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ABSTRACT

Literacy development begins in the very early stages of childhood, even though the activities of young children may not seem related to reading and writing. In 1966, New Zealand researcher Marie Clay introduced the term "emergent literacy" to describe the behaviors seen in young children when they use books and writing materials to imitate reading and writing activities, even though the children cannot actually read and write in the conventional sense. Early behaviors, such as "reading" from pictures and "writing" with scribbles are examples of emergent literacy and are an important part of children's literacy development. With the support of parents, caregivers, early childhood educators, and teachers, as well as exposure to a literacy-rich environment, children successfully progress from emergent to conventional reading. The theoretical and research-based knowledge of child development in general and of literacy development in particular provides an understanding of the literacy acquisition of young children and suggests strategies that can help children become successful, confident readers and writers. This paper discusses how to address the literacy needs of emergent and early readers. It consists of the following sections: Issue; Overview; Goals; Action Options; Pitfalls; Different Viewpoints; (Illustrative) Cases; and Contacts. (NKA)

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Critical Issue: Addressing the Literacy Needs of Emergent and Early Readers

ISSUE: Literacy development begins in the very early stages of childhood, even though the activities of young children may not seem related to reading and writing. Early behaviors such as "reading" from pictures and "writing" with scribbles are examples of emergent literacy and are an important part of children's literacy development. With the support of parents, caregivers, early childhood educators, and teachers, as well as exposure to a literacy-rich environment, children successfully progress from emergent to conventional reading. The theoretical and research-based knowledge of child development in general and of literacy development in particular provides an understanding of the literacy acquisition of young children and suggests strategies that can help children become successful, confident readers and writers.

Overview | Goals | Action Options | Pitfalls | Different Viewpoints | Cases | Contacts | References

OVERVIEW: In 1966, New Zealand researcher Marie Clay introduced the term *emergent literacy* to describe the behaviors seen in young children when they use books and writing materials to imitate reading and writing activities, even though the children cannot actually read and write in the conventional sense (Ramsburg, 1998). In the three decades since Clay's introduction, an extensive body of research has expanded the understanding of emergent literacy. According to current research, children's literacy development begins long before children start formal instruction in elementary school (Allington & Cunningham, 1996; Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999; Clay, 1991; Hall & Moats, 1999; Holdaway, 1979; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). This literacy development is nourished by social interactions with caring adults and exposure to literacy materials, such as children's storybooks (Sulzby, 1991). It proceeds along a continuum, and children acquire literacy skills in a variety of ways and at different ages (Emergent Literacy Project, n.d.; McGee & Richgels, 1996; Ramsburg, 1998; Strickland & Morrow, 1988). Children's skills in reading and writing develop at the same time and are interrelated rather than sequential (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Educators can promote children's understanding of reading and writing by helping them build literacy knowledge and skills through the use of engaged learning activities.

Children's growth from emergent to conventional literacy is influenced by their continuing literacy development, their

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understanding of literacy concepts, and the efforts of parents, caregivers, and teachers to promote literacy.

Children's Literacy Development

From as early as the first months through the second year of life, children's experiences with oral language development and literacy begin to build a foundation for later reading success (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999; Strickland & Morrow, 1988; Weaver, 1988). From 2 to 3 years of age, children begin to produce understandable speech in response to books and the written marks they create.

From 3 through 4 years of age, children show rapid growth in literacy. They begin to "read" their favorite books by themselves, focusing mostly on reenacting the story from the pictures. Eventually, they progress from telling about each picture individually to weaving a story from picture to picture using language that sounds like reading or written language (Holdaway, 1979; International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998; Sulzby, 1991). At this time, children also experiment with writing by forming scribbles, letter-like forms, and random strings of letters (Barclay, 1991; Clay, 1975; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; McGee & Richgels, 1996). They also begin to use "mock handwriting" (Clay, 1975) or wavy scribbles (Sulzby, 1985b) to imitate adult cursive writing. Letter-like forms or "mock letters" (Clay, 1975) are the young child's attempt to form alphabetic letters; these forms of writing eventually will develop into standard letters (Barclay, 1991). When using various forms of writing, children maintain their intention to create meaning and will often "read" their printed messages using language that sounds like reading (Clay, 1975; McGee & Richgels, 1996; Sulzby, 1985b).

Around age 5, children enter school and begin receiving formal literacy instruction. Most children at the kindergarten level are considered to be *emergent readers*. They continue to make rapid growth in literacy skills if they are exposed to literacy-rich environments (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999). Children at this age continue to "read" from books they've heard repeatedly. Gradually, these readings demonstrate the intonation patterns of the adult reader and language used in the book. Emergent readers are just beginning to control early reading strategies such as directionality, word-by-word matching, and concepts of print. They use pictures to support reading and rely heavily on their knowledge of language (Holdaway, 1979; Pinnell, 1996b; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Children's writing also develops rapidly during the kindergarten year. Just as children's reading acquisition does not occur in a linear path, children's writing skills also reflect an overlapping development. Children continue to use the variety of writing forms developed earlier, but they typically add random letter strings to their repertoire; in effect, they create strings of letters for their written messages without regard for the sounds represented by the letters (Sulzby, 1989, 1992). At this age, children plan their writing and are able to discuss their plans with others. If allowed, they begin to use invented spelling (phonetic spelling). Invented spelling typically represents the most dominant sounds in a word, such as the beginning and ending sounds (Gentry, 1982; McGee & Richgels, 1996; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Weaver, 1988). Even though children begin applying phonetic knowledge to create invented spellings, there is a lapse in time before they use phonetic clues to read what they write. Often children will try to recall what has been written or will use a picture created with the text to reread instead of using the letter clues (Kamberelis & Sulzby, 1988; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). It is interesting to note that once children start to use invented spelling, they do not use it equally for all writing tasks. In a study on emergent writing, Sulzby, Barnhart, and Hieshima (1989) observed children employing writing forms typical of earlier literacy development when asked to engage in more extended writing tasks. The children typically used invented spelling to represent single words or short phrases, but they reverted to less mature forms of writing when required to create more complex pieces.

Tracy van Peeren, a kindergarten teacher at Greenwood Elementary School in St. Clair Shores, Michigan, describes the use of developmentally appropriate literacy activities in the kindergarten classroom [560 k audio file]. Excerpted from a videotaped interview with Tracy van Peeren (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1999). A text transcript is available.

At some point during the kindergarten or first grade year, most children move from emergent literacy into conventional literacy. This process is gradual. Although all aspects of conventional literacy are developing during the emergent period, they become recognizable in conventional literacy. Educators working with young children must keep in mind that there is no prescribed grade level for reaching conventional literacy. Emergent literacy and conventional literacy "are not discrete stages but a continuum of learning that varies with the complexity of each individual's development," states Pinnell (1996b, p. 177). As children are moving into conventional literacy, they pass through different periods of development in their efforts to become successful readers, just as they did at the emergent level. Many traditional researchers use the terms *early reader*, *transitional reader*, and *fluent reader* to describe these periods of literacy growth.

Most children at the first grade level are or will become *early readers*. They know how to use early reading strategies and can read appropriately selected text independently after a story introduction given by a teacher (Pinnell, 1996b). Early readers begin to attend to print and apply the phonetic value (International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) of letters in order to read. They commonly look at beginning and ending letters in order to decode unfamiliar words (Clay, 1991; Pinnell, 1996b; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Children in this early reading period also begin to attend to more than one source for cues while reading. Attention is paid to meaning cues, grammatical cues, and prior knowledge on a limited basis (Clay, 1991; Holdaway, 1979; International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998; Pinnell, 1996b; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). These children are able to recognize a small number of words on sight. In writing, children typically progress through five stages of invented spelling, ranging from writing the initial consonant sound of a word to using conventional spelling.

Most children at the second grade level are *transitional readers*. They are able to read unknown text with more independence than can early readers. Transitional readers use meaning, grammatical, and letter cues more fully. They recognize a large number of frequently used words on sight and use pictures in a limited way while reading (Clay, 1991; International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998; Pinnell, 1996b; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Some children continue to use phonetic or invented spelling, but the spelling is easily readable. Sometime during the development from early reader into transitional reader, children's writing also begins to demonstrate characteristics of the transitional speller (Gentry, 1982; McGee & Richgels, 1996; Weaver, 1988). Transitional spellers are able to apply spelling rules, patterns, and a variety of other strategies for putting words on paper (Gentry, 1982; Weaver, 1988).

Children at the third grade level typically are *fluent readers*. They use all sources of information flexibly to read a variety of unknown texts. Fluent readers are able to read for meaning with less attention to decoding and can independently solve problems encountered in the text (Clay, 1991; International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998; Pinnell, 1996b; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Typically, writing has developed into mostly conventional spelling; children may employ transitional and phonetic spellings to spell infrequently used words or words that are challenging to the child. Children are able to write expressively in many different forms using rich vocabulary and more complex sentences. They often revise and edit their own work (International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998). If the

reading materials are appropriately challenging, children's fluency (which includes automatic word recognition, rapid decoding, and checking for meaning) continues to increase.

Children's Concepts of Literacy

In addition to acknowledging children's developmental acquisition of decoding, comprehension, and writing skills, emergent literacy research emphasizes the changes that occur in children's understanding of literacy concepts. "The transition to real reading involves changes not only in composition of skills but also in concepts about the nature of literacy," note Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998). As children have more experience with reading and writing, their understanding of the concepts of reading and writing expand and grow to fit their new knowledge.

For instance, Sulzby (1985a) describes categories of children's storybook reading from emergent through conventional reading. She notes that children eventually move from pointing and labeling pictures in a book, to "reading" a story through the illustrations, to telling the story using book language, and finally to reading conventionally using the text of a story.

An important transition is when children's "reading" of stories changes from sounding like oral language to sounding like written language. This transition demonstrates a change in ideas from thinking of reading as spoken words to understanding that reading is recreated from written text that has special wordings (McGee & Richgels, 1996; Sulzby, 1991). A similar shift in language can be observed in children's story dictation and in the rereading of their emergent writing (Sulzby, Barnhart, & Hieshima, 1989).

The young child's concept of words changes as the child's literacy development evolves. Ferreiro (1986), for example, notes that young children often think words should show some figural resemblance to their meaning; later, children think words need a minimum number of symbols; still later, they think words need varied letters. In a study by Pick, Unze, Brownell, Drozdal, and Hopmann (1978), children as young as 3 years old were asked to sort word cards into piles of "words" and "not words." The children put all single-letter and two-letter cards into the "not words" pile and cards of three or more letters into the "words" pile. Their notion of words was a string of at least three letters. In contrast, first graders put all word cards they could read--regardless of length--into the "words" pile, and all word cards they did not recognize into the "not words" pile. The first graders' concept of words was that words can have any number of letters but must be recognizable and meaningful to the reader.

These studies indicate that children's ideas about words are quite different from adults' concepts of words. "Because children construct their own knowledge, this knowledge does not come fully developed and is often quite different from that of an adult. Thus, there are differences between how an adult understands reading and writing and how a child understands reading and writing," note McGee and Richgels (1996, p. 7). As children progress into conventional literacy, however, their concepts of literacy gradually change toward the more conventional adult conceptualizations.

Efforts to Promote Children's Literacy Development

Because reading and writing are thinking processes (Allington & Cunningham, 1996; McGee & Richgels, 1996), emergent literacy also must be considered in the context of children's developing cognitive skills. The theories of both Piaget and Vygotsky are relevant to the discussion of emergent literacy and help explain the cognitive concepts formed by young learners. Emergent literacy is partly discovered; children construct their own ideas about literacy as they actively participate in literacy activities (Piaget). Emergent literacy also is based on behaviors modeled and supported by adults (Vygotsky) that encourage children to change and refine their own ideas to more closely match conventional notions. One example of this interface between literacy acquisition and literacy instruction is the child's development of phonemic awareness (awareness that spoken words are made with individual sounds). By playing

with language, such as rhyming or substituting sounds in words, some children develop a degree of phonemic awareness on their own, while other children require instruction from adults. Instruction may enable some children to use metacognition (the process of thinking about and regulating one's own learning) to achieve a higher level of phonemic awareness.

David Kerbow, a researcher for the Center for School Improvement at the University of Chicago, discusses the development of phonemic awareness and the value of reading aloud to children [784 k audio file]. Excerpted from a videotaped interview with David Kerbow (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1999). A text transcript is available.

In their literacy development, children progress through several categories of phonological skills. The earliest and easiest tasks involve rhyming, identifying words that rhyme, and thinking of rhyming words. Intermediate tasks involve the blending of phonemes (for example, /i/ and /n/ = in) and syllable splitting (separating the first phoneme of a word from the ending sound: /b/ /at/). The most difficult tasks involve the complete segmentation of phonemes and manipulation of them to form new words (Griffith & Olson, 1992; Hall & Moats, 1999).

Children's parents, caregivers, and early childhood educators play an important role in ensuring that children successfully progress in their literacy development. Children's literacy efforts are best supported by adults' interactions with children through reading aloud and conversation and by children's social interactions with each other (McGee & Richgels, 1996). It is imperative that caregivers and educators in all settings are knowledgeable about emergent literacy and make a concerted effort to ensure that children experience literacy-rich environments to support their development into conventional literacy.

Of utmost importance is reading aloud to children and providing opportunities for them to discuss the stories that they hear (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999). Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson (1985) state, "The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children. This is especially so during the preschool years" (p. 23). Reading aloud to children helps them develop in four areas that are important to formal reading instruction: oral language, cognitive skills, concepts of print, and phonemic awareness. Development of these skills provides a strong foundation to support literacy development during the early school years (Allington & Cunningham, 1996; Hall & Moats, 1999; Holdaway, 1979).

Children who are read to develop background knowledge about a range of topics and build a large vocabulary, which assists in later reading comprehension and development of reading strategies. They become familiar with rich language patterns and gain an understanding of what written language sounds like. Reading aloud to children helps them associate reading with pleasure and encourages them to seek out opportunities to read on their own. Children also become familiar with the reading process by watching how others read, and they develop an understanding of story structure. Repeated readings of favorite stories allow children an informal opportunity to gradually develop a more elaborate understanding of these concepts. By revisiting stories many times, children focus on unique features of a story or text and reinforce previous understandings. In addition, rereadings enable children to read emergently (Sulzby, 1985b; Sulzby, Buhle, & Kaiser, 1999).

All children need to have high-quality children's books as a part of their daily experience (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999). Storytime can include a variety of reading materials, including "books that positively reflect children's identity, home language, and culture" (International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998, p. 9). Children benefit from having access to a wide range of literacy materials, such as books,

magazines, newspapers, and a variety of writing materials. The library media specialist at school or the children's librarian at the public library can help identify a variety of materials, including picture books, rhyming books, alphabet books, short stories, and chapter books.

Literacy-rich environments, both at home and at school, are important in promoting literacy and preventing reading difficulties. In literacy-rich home environments, parents and caregivers provide children with occasions for daily reading, extended discourse (extensive talking or writing), language play, experimentation with literacy materials, book talk (discussion of characters, action, and plot), and dramatic play (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999; International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998). In literacy-rich classrooms, teachers incorporate the characteristics of literacy-rich home environments, but they also use grouping for learning, developmentally appropriate practices, and literacy routines; in addition, they have classroom designs that continue to encourage reading and writing (McGee & Richgels, 1996) through learning centers and engaged learning activities. In their joint position statement, Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children, the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1998) confirm that the first eight years of a child's life are the most important years for literacy development and that developmentally appropriate practices at home and at school are crucial for ensuring that children become successful readers.

David Kerbow, a researcher for the Center for School Improvement at the University of Chicago, notes that developmentally appropriate literacy activities can function at different levels and are valuable and applicable to all children in a classroom [364 k audio file]. Excerpted from a videotaped interview with David Kerbow (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1999). A text transcript is available.

Some children, however, enter elementary school without a strong background in literacy. The children most at risk of developing reading problems are those who begin school with low language skills, less phonemic awareness and letter knowledge, and less familiarity with literacy tasks and underlying purposes (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999). Research in the areas of family risk factors that contribute to children's reading difficulties, adult-child interactions during story reading, and language development delays verifies that successes or struggles with reading can be observed very early in a child's life. To help children develop emergent skills and overcome barriers to literacy, teachers may need to take special efforts in working with children individually and in offering support and encouragement to parents and caregivers for participating in their children's literacy development. Schools also can use a wide variety of literacy intervention programs to minimize identified risk factors and support children in their literacy development.

Special consideration can be given to children who do not have strong skills in oral English. According to Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998), non-English-speaking children need adequate preparation before they are taught to read in English. The ability to speak English provides the foundation for learning alphabetic principles, the structure of the language, and the content of the material they are reading. If children cannot speak English, they can be taught to read and write in their own language while becoming proficient in English. If that is not possible, "the initial instructional priority should be developing the children's oral proficiency in English" (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998, p. 325). Formal reading instruction in English can be started after the child is adequately proficient in oral English.

It is imperative that teachers who work with young children either in preschool or primary environments are continually provided opportunities to learn more about child development, especially as it relates to literacy acquisition (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999; International Reading Association & National Association for the

Education of Young Children, 1998). Preservice education and later professional development can provide the research base as well as instruction on how to apply literacy research to classroom practice (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999). By continually expanding their knowledge base, teachers will be better prepared to select appropriate instructional strategies, interventions, and materials to ensure that they are meeting the diverse needs of young children.

Screening and assessment are crucial tools for determining children's literacy needs. Screening provides educators a quick look at children's skills and development in specific areas prior to beginning reading instruction, while assessment provides ongoing feedback about children's literacy progress and growth. Both screening and ongoing assessment can help teachers identify children who are developing atypically and are in need of intervention. The earlier children receive this intervention, the better. During kindergarten and first grade, children can be screened for phonemic awareness, alphabetic knowledge, and an understanding of basic language concepts (Texas Education Agency, 1997a). Throughout kindergarten and the primary grades, teachers can use a full continuum of assessment options, ranging from performance-based assessment to standardized testing. The use of performance-based assessments (such as observational records of reading and writing, developmental benchmarks, and portfolios) can be used to inform daily teaching (Allington & Cunningham, 1996; Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999; International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998; Slegers, 1996). End-of-year assessments inform parents and educators of children's literacy progress and assist in planning for the following school year (Texas Education Agency, 1997a).

Literacy development begins very early in a child's life and forms a foundation for the acquisition of conventional literacy. "Research consistently demonstrates that the more children know about language and literacy before they begin formal schooling, the better equipped they are to succeed in reading," note Burns, Griffin, and Snow (1999, p. 8). Parents, caregivers, and teachers need to ensure that young children are exposed to literacy-rich environments and receive developmentally appropriate literacy instruction. Such environments and experiences have a profound effect on children's literacy development by providing opportunities and encouragement for children to become successful readers.

GOALS:

- Teachers and caregivers understand and support children's emergent literacy and, in later years, children's transition to conventional reading and writing.
- Teachers, administrators, and specialists understand the developmental nature of emergent literacy and early conventional literacy; they ensure that the K-2 curriculum and instructional materials are appropriate.
- Parents are supported in sharing and exploring literacy with their children.
- Homes, day care settings, and schools provide literacy-rich environments for children.
- Home cultures and languages are used as literacy resources, and children are read to from rich literature.
- The literacy program supports children's social, emotional, aesthetic, maturational, and cognitive needs.
- Children's literacy development is supported through balanced reading programs that incorporate quality

literature, writing opportunities, development of phonemic awareness, and alphabetic knowledge.

- Teachers and caregivers participate in long-term professional development and learning forums in emergent literacy and early conventional literacy; they recognize, support, and assess children's literacy skills.

ACTION OPTIONS: Administrators, teachers and early childhood educators, and parents and caregivers can take the following steps to provide opportunities for children's literacy acquisition.

Administrators:

- Work with community groups and libraries to provide informational programs for parents regarding the development of literacy skills in young children.

- Review research on reading and young children, such as Beating the Odds in Teaching All Children to Read, Reading the Right Way, Beginning Reading Instruction: Components and Features of a Research-Based Reading Program, Balanced Reading Instruction, and Improving the Reading Achievement of America's Children.

- Become familiar with Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children (the joint position statement of the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children), and the Primary Literacy Standards developed as part of the New Standards project.

- Develop an understanding of phonological terms.

- Work with teachers to provide a developmentally appropriate curriculum in reading and writing that is "challenging but attainable with sufficient adult support" (International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998, p. 8).

- Develop strategies for preventing reading difficulties in young children.

- Ensure that the library or resource center has extensive and varied resources for younger students.

- Ensure that appropriate screenings and assessments are used to determine intervention programs for children who are experiencing reading problems and children who are at risk of developing reading problems.

- Support teachers in implementing developmentally appropriate literacy practices in their classrooms.

- Provide teachers with ongoing professional development on topics such as children's growth from emergent literacy to conventional literacy, literacy instruction, and developmentally appropriate practice. (Refer to CIERA links for various literacy and educational resources.)

Teachers and Early Childhood Educators:

- Use developmentally appropriate literacy practice that acknowledges children's development, interests, and

literacy knowledge.

- Read to children daily and allow them to take turns "reading" the material to each other.
- Use a wide range of literacy materials in class. Allow children to experience a variety of children's books, magazines, and newspapers.
- Take time to listen to children to determine their interests, language skills, and areas of need.
- Use children's home cultures and languages as literacy resources.
- Provide multiple rereadings of stories for pleasure and exploration. Invite children to join in the readings, honoring their emergent reading behaviors.
- Create a literacy-rich classroom environment. Provide appropriate literacy activities for children, such as literacy activities for day care and preschool settings, literacy activities for kindergarten, and literacy activities for first grade.
- Ensure that the school provides appropriate writing materials for children.
- Encourage children to compose stories and informational articles in emergent forms; provide opportunities for children to read, share, and display their writing.
- Provide opportunities for reading and writing in a kindergarten classroom that will benefit children at every phase of their literacy development.
- Provide "writing experiences that allow the flexibility to use nonconventional forms of writing at first (invented or phonetic spelling) and over time move to conventional forms" (International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998, p.9).
- Use appropriate strategies for teaching beginning reading.
- As children begin to read conventionally, provide balanced reading instruction to teach both skills and meaning and to meet the reading needs of individual children.
- Share ideas with parents and caregivers on creating an optimal environment to support young children's literacy development.
- Participate in professional development activities to increase understanding of emergent literacy and appropriate teaching practices.

Parents and Caregivers:

- Read aloud to children. Share and explore books and other reading materials with children.
- Provide a literacy-rich environment by promoting home literacy activities for infants and toddlers and home literacy activities for preschoolers.

- Realize the value of helping children learn about reading.
- Encourage children's literacy development at home through resources such as Beginning Reading Instruction: A Practical Guide for Parents and Helping Your Child Learn to Read.
- Talk with and listen to children to promote their oral language development.
- Encourage children to retell stories that have been read to them.
- Encourage children to draw pictures or "write" about the stories they have listened to and to emergently "read" these stories.
- Provide children with a positive role model by taking time to read and write.
- Visit the library regularly with children. Children may enjoy having their own library card.
- Take children to the "story hour," children's plays, and other community activities.
- Develop an understanding of phonological terms.
- Take advantage of opportunities to learn and read about children's development and literacy acquisition.

IMPLEMENTATION PITFALLS: Because of the various demands of early childhood classrooms, teachers working with young children sometimes find it difficult to match the method of teaching with each child's level of literacy development and individual skills. Instructional activities that are used before the child is ready will result in less-than-expected progress. For example, if instruction focuses on isolated skills (such as word recognition, one-to-one pointing and chanting, or sounding out nonsense words) before a child has developed the prior concepts necessary for mastering these skills, real understanding and learning cannot take place. To be successful in their literacy acquisition, children need to grasp basic instruction before they can add new skills. Early assessment, screening, and knowledge of children's abilities help ensure that children receive appropriate and individualized instruction.

Traditional school-based literacy programs often assume that children's literacy concepts are sufficiently developed to match the adult notion of literacy. In light of what is known about children's developmental progression, this assumption may or may not be true when children enter school. To ensure successful reading experiences, instruction needs to be appropriate to the child's development. For example, instruction must take into consideration the child's concept of words. If a child thinks only nouns and verbs are words and rejects one- to two-letter words (such as *a*, *an*, *on*, and *of*), drilling on these words as sight vocabulary does not make sense. This idea is particularly relevant in determining when to introduce conventional reading instruction. Moving slightly ahead of development may work with 7- to 8-year-olds but not with 3- to 4-year-olds.

Teachers may assume that very young children should be taught through a conventional model of reading instead of an emergent model. They may provide direct instruction to the class instead of taking time to determine the appropriate instruction for each child. Teachers should encourage and support the literacy development of each

individual. If a child is not able to apply the phonetic value or determine meaning independently, the teachers' role is to guide the child through these learning processes and ensure successful reading experiences.

When working with young children, teachers may focus on one literacy component to the exclusion of others (for example, emphasizing phonics to the exclusion of reading for learning and enjoyment). Learning to read will be more successful for children if the various components are interwoven into literacy instruction.

Teachers may be given reading tools and materials without long-term professional development to ensure deep understanding of children's literacy development. Professional development is important in helping teachers understand that appropriate reading and writing skills should be taught to children at the appropriate times. These skills must be presented in different ways to reach all children in the classroom. Professional development also helps teachers assess children's readiness to learn new skills.

Differences in training of early childhood educators and K-8 educators have resulted in widely varying programs and interpretations of emergent literacy. Early childhood educators tend to focus on nurturing the social and emotional needs of children and providing developmentally appropriate instruction. Teachers trained for grades K-8, on the other hand, tend to be more focused on curriculum and instructional strategies. Recent research indicates a trend toward a more structured academic kindergarten (Slegers, 1996) in which the curriculum reflects skills that have been moved down from first grade. As a result, teachers may feel pressure to formally teach reading skills to children in kindergarten. If these teachers keep in mind the different kinds of development their students demonstrate, they will be able to provide appropriate instruction for all students. Individualized instruction with a focus on continual progress within a continuum of learning will meet the varying needs of children.

DIFFERENT POINTS OF VIEW: Although some early childhood educators provide activities that support emergent literacy development, others interpret "developmentally appropriate" to mean that reading and writing are academic skills that belong only in programs for older children (Slegers, 1996).

Traditionally, children's literacy skills were compared with adults' literacy skills, and reading and writing were viewed as difficult processes for children to learn. "Children were considered knowledgeable about literacy only when their reading and writing approximated adults' reading and writing," states the Emergent Literacy Project (n.d.). "Children who could identify written words without picture clues were considered readers. Similarly, children who could spell words so that adults could read them were considered writers. This definition of reading and writing was based on what adults could do."

Some educators believe that children must reach a certain level of physical and neurological maturation before they are ready for reading and writing. This perspective, called *reading readiness*, "suggests that there is a point in time when a child is ready to begin to learn to read and write" (Emergent Literacy Project, n.d.) rather than a developmental continuum of reading and writing acquisition. "It also assumes that physical and neurological maturation alone prepare the child to take advantage of instruction in reading and writing," note the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1998, p. 2). They add, "The readiness perspective implies that until children reach a certain stage of maturity, all exposure to reading and writing, except perhaps being read stories, is a waste of time or even potentially harmful" (p. 2). According to the reading readiness viewpoint, conventional literacy skills should be taught in kindergarten so children are ready for the first-grade curriculum when they enter first grade.

There are varying opinions on the strategies for teaching young children to read and write. Some educators believe that instruction in conventional literacy should be based on early, explicit, and intensive instruction in sound-letter relationships to develop children's comprehension and decoding skills. Others emphasize immersion in language and literature.

Before the concept of emergent literacy was introduced, it was believed that children must learn to read before they could learn to write. Some educators still believe that this approach is the best way to teach young children.

Some parents and educators think that schools should discourage the use of invented spelling. They believe that invented spelling prevents children from learning to spell correctly and affects their success in school and life.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASES:

- Jo Wingo, a kindergarten teacher at Centralized Kindergarten North School, in Indianapolis, Indiana, demonstrates literacy best practice in a kindergarten classroom [text and videostreaming feature].
- Elizabeth Sulzby, professor of education at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and principal investigator at the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement, discusses children's development of emergent writing [text and videostreaming feature].
- The literacy program at Cherry Valley Elementary School, in Polson, Montana, emphasizes teaching and reaching each child as an individual.
- Successful Early Childhood Education in an Imperfect World describes educational strategies--including literacy practices--used with young children in four Northwest schools: Cherry Valley Elementary School, in Polson, Montana; Helen Baller Elementary School, in Camas, Washington; Harborview/Capital Elementary School, in Juneau, Alaska; and Mary Harrison Primary School, in Toledo, Oregon.

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References

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